OASIS ALBUM DETAILS

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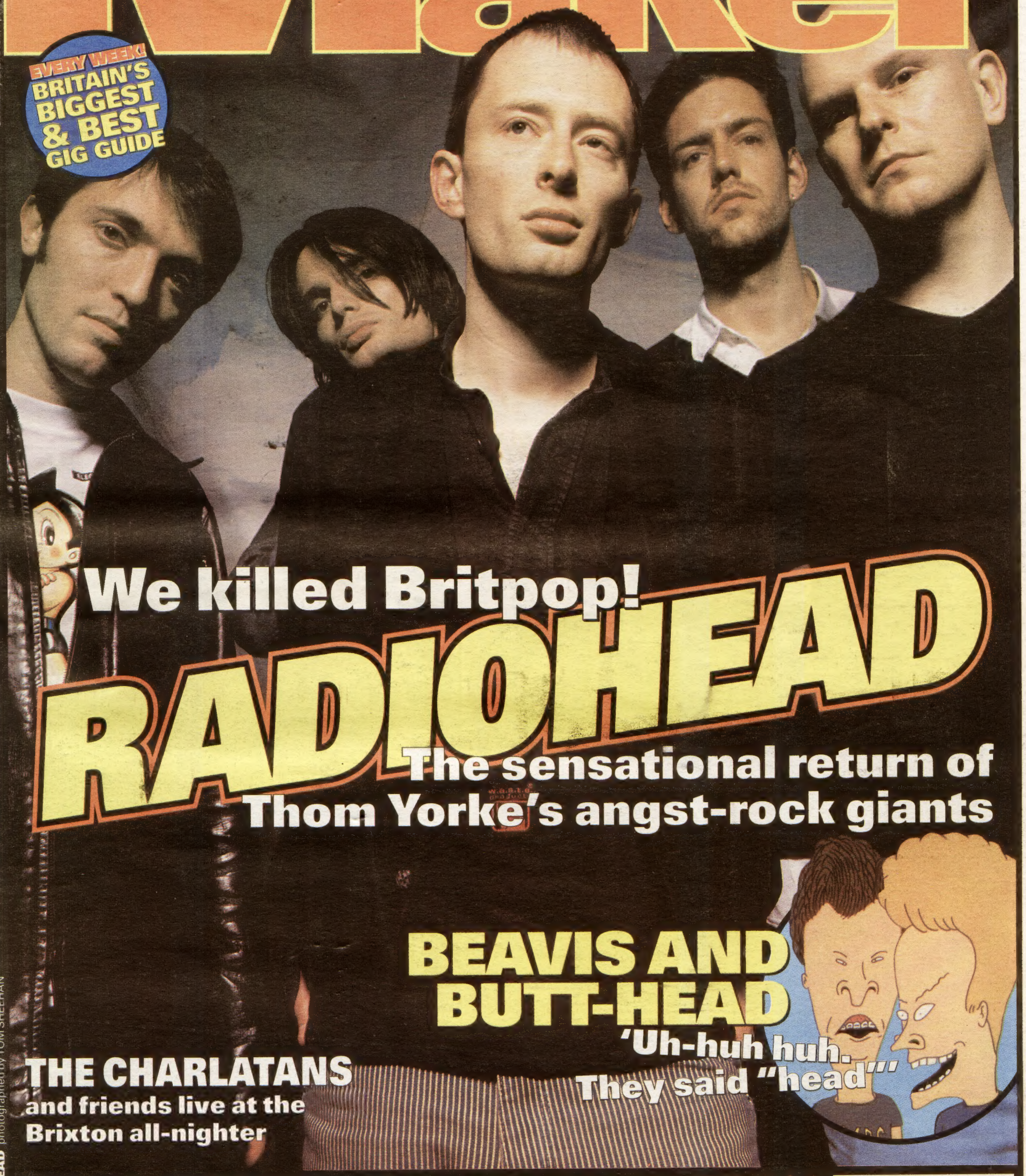

We killed Britpop!

RADIOHEAD

The sensational return of Thom Yorke's angst-rock giants

BEAVIS AND BUTT-HEAD

'Uh-huh huh. They said "head"'

THE CHARLATANS

and friends live at the Brixton all-nighter

THE SEAHORSES ★ PAUL WELLER ★ EMBRACE
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TRIBAL GATHERING AND ESSENTIAL FESTIVAL PREVIEWS

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Melody Maker RADIOHEAD photographed by TOM SHEEHAN

Interview: **MARK SUTHERLAND** Photos: **TOM SHEEHAN**

ROUNDING T

It's been over two years since RADIOHEAD's 'The Bends' first took our breath away and hinted at the beginning of the end for Britpop. Now the frontrunners of New Grave are back with a mad, bad and dangerous new single. We chased them to Oxford, expecting a chat. THOM YORKE, however, had other ideas. . .

THIS episode of "The Professionals" begins, as so many episodes of "The Professionals" do, at a deserted farmhouse.

A lone journalist has been lured to Oxford on the promise of a story. He is met at the station, only to be bundled into the back of a car, driven into the surrounding countryside and dropped off in the middle of nowhere at a top secret location. Not that there would seem to be much of interest here to the outside world: some decaying farm machinery, a few containers full of potentially lethal agricultural chemicals, some cows . . . but wait, this room must be important. Why else would the sign on it read "Danger: Low Oxygen! Do not enter sealed room: you will pass out in 30 seconds and die in minutes!"

Before the journalist can investigate further, however, there is a commotion outside. As the first spots of rain begin to splash on the dusty ground, five men emerge from a neighbouring outhouse, carrying themselves with the natural "us against the world" swagger of the gang. More to the point, at least two of them look like they'd be a bit tasty in a street fight, so now seems a suitable time to make a getaway. But, as he treads gingerly down a dirt track alleyway, there is a sudden screech of tyres and roar of accelerator pedal. A revved up Almera, driven by a slight man wearing the unmistakeable savage haircut and permanent grimace of the TV villain, rounds the corner and powers towards the hapless hack. It seems a collision is inevitable but, at the last minute, a dive-cum-forward-roll saves his skin. The Almera disappears into the distance, with only a cloud of dust and a echo of a half-remembered, in-car conversation ("Stop whispering!" "I can't!") to prove it was ever here. A further search of the farmhouse and extensive inquiries in town reveal nothing and the journalist returns to London empty-handed. Time to call in Bodie and Doyle. . .

RADIOFREE OXFORD

THE real Professionals are already here, of course, and operating under the code name Radiohead. But their leader is being anything but professional and, consequently, even Bodie and Doyle might find them an impossible case to crack. Because what the above, over-dramatic and largely fictional introduction is actually trying to say is The Maker went all the way to Radiohead's Oxfordshire farmhouse studio only for singer/figurehead Thom Yorke to decline to do an interview. True, the other members of the band – guitarists Jonny Greenwood and Ed O'Brien, bassist Colin Greenwood and drummer Phil Selway – remain geniality personified and will gladly answer questions on anything and everything. True, after immense pressure, Thom will eventually share a few state-of-mind soundnibbles via the fax machine. And truer still, Thom doesn't actually try to run anyone over or, indeed, even drive an all-action Almera (it's a knackered old Fiat Punto actually, "Top Gear" fanatics). But this week's episode of "The Professionals" is sorely in need of some drama. . .

It might not matter if there wasn't so much to talk about. But there is. Because Radiohead have just delivered the long-awaited follow-up album to "The Bends". You may already know the first single, a sprawling, spiralling epic called "Paranoid Android" that has probably already blown your mind into tiny little bits via the beautiful madness of the current Radio 1 playlist. What you won't know is that, in a month or so, the album, "OK Computer", is going to come into your life, sweep up those tiny little bits, put your mind back together and then blow it all over again. Just for a laugh. Just because it *can*. It's a record that demands explanation but the one person who could explain it seems rather more interested in playing silly buggers.

In the weeks prior to this interview, The Maker was made aware that Thom was unhappy with the way he's been portrayed in the past and wouldn't do a one-to-one interview, so a happy medium of a chat with the entire band was negotiated. And certainly, as we meet at the group's office near Oxford, the vibes seem affable enough.

We all drive off to the farmhouse where the band rehearse and record – that "Danger: Low Oxygen!" sign is actually nothing more than a burglar deterrent, though it might explain the sense of claustrophobia that so often invades Radiohead recordings – where Thom, resplendent in a new butcher-shop crop and with what looks like his shopping list written in Tipp-Ex on his hand, joins in an impromptu "jam" "session", shares a joke or two about the piles of dangerous-looking anti-oxidants lying about the place and seems perfectly happy to play the rock star for the benefit of the cameras.

Immediately afterwards, however, Thom simply gets in his car and drives off at speed. He doesn't even say goodbye, let alone explain why The Maker readers, who have always loved and supported Radiohead, shouldn't have access to the thoughts he'd already shared with a couple of those clappy-happy monthly music mags who never gave a flying f*** about him or his band until the platinum disc signs appeared before their eyes.

It's the weekly music press, however, who've been cast as the villains of Radiohead's public image. In championing the band we, like everyone else, have inevitably concentrated on the man who writes all the lyrics, sings all the songs, dominates the videos and stands at the centre-front of the stage when they play live. And consequently, we've got it all wrong. Radiohead, you see, are *a band*.

Well, hold the f***ing front page. Of course Radiohead are a band. Radiohead wouldn't be Radiohead – hell, wouldn't be The Greatest Rock Band On God's Earth Right This Very Second – were it not for Jonny and Ed's famously fractured guitar sound, Colin's monumental bass and Phil's thunderously inventive drumming. But roll over Guitar Monthly and tell Control Zone the news: these things don't make sparkling front cover copy. Leave that stuff to The Professionals. Lyrics, being best mates with Michael Stipe, the immense pressures of having your most intimate thoughts exposed to a worldwide audience – these things are interesting. And The

'What I really hated about Britpop was all that tiresome irony. As if bands shouldn't be serious things'
– Colin Greenwood

THE BENDS

(l-r): Jonny, Colin, Ed, Thom and Phil

Professionals, by their own admission, know very little about it.

"It's OK though," says a hideously embarrassed-looking Ed, once it's clear Thom will not be joining us, "Thom trusts us to explain everything."

Oh, what the hell. We have come all the way to Oxford, after all, and Colin assures us he knows what New Grave is while Jonny says there's a lovely little restaurant just down the road; we might as well give it a go. But any mention of "paradiddles" or "production techniques" and we're outta here.

ED O'Brien stares long and hard into the tape recorder, takes a slug of lager and confesses: "'The Bends' completely and utterly changed my life."

Not a bad start. Perhaps he'll make a dysfunctional figurehead for a generation yet. Tell us more, Ed.

"I don't live with my dad any more. I mean, I miss him and everything, but it seems like a major upheaval to say, 'Yeah, I've got my own place.'"

Oh dear, oh dear and, in a very real sense, oh dear. A record that's sold over two million copies worldwide; that's been acclaimed as one of, if not *the* landmark rock releases of the Nineties; seen Radiohead become pals with everyone from Michael Stipe to Mark Owen; single-handedly slain the Britpop beast and given birth to a new "movement" to take its place... and "the others" in Radiohead think it hasn't changed their lives. And, in truth, it probably hasn't much, beyond an even healthier bank balance and an even greater freedom in the studio.

Thom, well, that's a different story. He's had to put up with everything from worldwide adulation to having various sections of the media speculate wildly as to the state of his mental health. Later, he will comment, "Most of the time the attention being placed on us was really funny, then sometimes it wasn't. A lot of time and effort was spent getting to the point where this was not relevant" but, in the meantime, at least Radiohead are aware of the affect that monumental album had on *other people's* lives.

SMASH HITS

"THE weirdest people in the weirdest places are united by that record," grins Colin, the saucer-eyed king of the rambling anecdote. "We've heard so many stories about how it's really popular with ravers, who play it during their post-rave comedown spliff. And The Daisies, who share the same management as us, got stopped in their van in London on the day of an IRA bomb. They were surrounded by armed police who wanted to know who the hell they were. Then they mentioned our name and this copper with a gun goes, 'Oh "The Bends" is brilliant, and the mood relaxed instantly."

It's even stranger that "The Bends" should have such a far-reaching impact when you consider it was released at the commercial height of Britpop. As the spotlight pinned Oasis, Pulp and Blur in its harsh glare, "alternative" music became one big hedonistic knees-up in which, if Radiohead were invited at all, they were cast as the miserable gits sitting on the stairs trying to bring everyone down. It wasn't their party, but they cried anyway.

"What I really hated about Britpop," fumes Colin,. "was all that tiresome irony. As if bands shouldn't be serious things."

"We don't do irony," confirms Ed. "The only times we've tried were when we were in America, where it just goes over everyone's heads, and on 'Pop Is Dead', which was rubbish. Surprisingly, those Saturday morning TV show offers didn't come pouring in."

An offer to play the 1995 Smash Hits Poll Winners Party, however, somewhat surprisingly, did.

"We had to do that just because it was so bizarre," smiles Ed, whose lanky, grunge heart-throb looks aren't actually so far away from the teen lust object profile. "There was Take That, East 17, Boyzone and us, doing 'My Iron Lung' of all things. We were stood at the side of the stage for ▶

half an hour before we went on and it was bedlam – all these girls just screaming and screaming and screaming. And then we went on, there was this awkward silence and then the screaming started again – for entirely different reasons. It seemed like the entire audience suddenly burst into tears, tugged at its mum's sleeve and demanded to be taken to the toilet."

Once out of the country, however, their chosen role as Britpop refuseniks was harder to stick to.

"Abroad," sighs Colin, "We were asked endless questions about it, as if we really fitted the Britpop blueprint. 'The Bends' was many things, but it wasn't really *chirpy* was it? It was more like a darkness lumbering over the horizon with gun turrets strafing the Britpop hordes with misery. Er, sorry. Got a bit carried away there."

Well, maybe. But those misery bullets clearly hit a few targets – so many, in fact, that "OK Computer" will arrive into a world that has come around to Radiohead's way of thinking. Britpop lies buried in an appropriately shallow (new) grave – and is now being danced on by moody types in black nail varnish playing epic, windswept rock and espousing something called The New Seriousness.

Certainly, even this irony-despising band can find a little black humour in the fact that 1995 saw Radiohead dubbed "the new U2", while 1997 sees a whole crop of "new Radioheads " (hello Mansun, Travis, Longpigs *et al*) and irrefutable proof that not even U2 want to be U2 any more (hello their techno-tinged "Pop" album).

"It's just bloody weird, really, isn't it?" says Ed, toffily. "I mean, I quite like Mansun, but I'll be a lot more interested in their second album."

So, New Grave: is it all your fault? "No," says Jonny, whose black clobber and angular on-the-run-from-Suede cheekbones mark him down as the group's most likely goth sympathiser. "Definitely not. No, really. Blame the Manics, not us. We don't wear enough make-up to be truly New Grave."

As he says this, Jonny snatches his hand away from his glass of sparkling mineral water and hides it under the table. He is wearing black nail varnish.

BENDING RULES

WHEN Jonny Greenwood was 14, he was already a shit-hot guitarist, but he was also a bit of a worrier. One day, he was suddenly thrown into a blind panic about his ability, deciding that he couldn't possibly be a successful musician if no one in his family was musical. He scoured the family archives, but all he could find was a grandfather who briefly took up the euphonium. Even now, his confidence is regularly shaken by a mother who has "absolutely no understanding" of what he does. He played her some stuff recently and she demanded to know what "that bomtibomtibom stuff in the background" was. "That's the drums, Mum," Jonny sighed. Perhaps this is why he and the rest of the band are touchingly unsure as to whether their records are actually any cop or not. By the time "The Bends" came out, Jonny had already decided it was rubbish.

"I remember thinking some of the songs were OK," he smiles, "But that was about it."

And, even as "OK Computer" emerges into a newly Radiohead-friendly world, to be greeted by a massive fanbase champing at the bit, they are worried. Very worried.

"I hope we don't lose people who liked 'The Bends'," frets Colin. "But the way I see it is, if this was the first album you ever heard by us it would be pretty difficult to get into. I don't think we'll be getting new fans in the way the Manics have."

"Maybe we should be feeling more secure nowadays," admits Jonny. "But really, we've got no gauge as to how popular we are, let alone how good we are. It's one of the few arguments for rock journalism, because the people who actually make records have no idea as to whether they are any good or not."

Nice to know we have our uses. So, just to put Jonny's mind at rest, let's reiterate that "OK Computer" is an astounding album, at once a solid continuation of, and massive leap forward from, "The Bends". There is less of the heart-rending stadium balladry that broke the band worldwide (though "No Surprises" and "Let Down" will still see lighters hoisted aloft in ice hockey stadiums the planet over) and rather more in the way of headf*** experimentation (the DJ Shadow-inspired drum loops on "Airbag", the constant gear changes on "Paranoid Android"). There is less harrowing personal angst (although "Climbing Up The Walls" is the most scary thing they've ever done) and more interest in the world beyond Thom Yorke's personal diaries.

Significantly though, while it's every bit as brilliant as "The Bends", it's nowhere near as commercial. Their record company is still, in public, talking "OK Computer" up as the album that will make them a genuine stadium-level concern, but the harsh facts are the internal sales forecast was actually adjusted downwards once the Americans had heard the record. Ironic, really, that Radiohead should respond to commercial success in exactly the same way as their nemeses Blur – by getting seriously weird on us. A reaction to the pressure (ha!) of following up "The Bends"?

"What?" says Colin. "Like, we either top "The Bends" or we top ourselves?"

"People said we were under pressure after 'Creep'," points out Jonny, not entirely unreasonably. "And we came up with 'The Bends'. But we weren't really trying to 'top' it as such. Although it did seem like we were being set up to do The Big American Crossover Album, like 'The Joshua Tree' or whatever, but we just wanted to carry on where we left off."

"Then again," points out the thoroughly charming, if dubiously trousered Phil, "when 'The Bends' came out everyone went on about how uncommercial that was. Twelve months later it was being hailed as a pop classic. The record company were worried there wasn't a single on it – and we ended up with five Top 30 hits from it!"

Perhaps this is why "Paranoid Android" has been chosen as the first single from the album (assuming you don't count their "Help" contribution, "Lucky", that is, which is really only on the album cos of its hideous failure as a 45). Because, frankly, it sounds like nothing on earth, let alone a snappy 180-second single. Inspired in equal measure by Pixies and, um, Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody", over the course of nearly seven minutes, the song mutates from a chiming, plaintive anthem, to a spasmodic free jazz "workout" to a white noise freakout and back again.

Apparently, when it was first played to one Radio 1 producer, he had to go and have a bit of a lie down afterwards. Which hasn't stopped the station plugging it at every opportunity over the last few weeks and even making special trailers that go "In '93, we brought you 'Creep', in '94, 'My Iron Lung'..." etc (highly amusing, considering Radio 1's reluctance to playlist the band in the past). But even so, it's hard to imagine the band playing "Paranoid Android" to their A&R man and instantly having him whoop, "Now, that's the single!"

"That's precisely what he *did* do, actually," smirks Colin. "I think the record company knew we'd want that one, so they were trying to call our bluff, as it were. But it does feel like a victory to have Radio 1 hammering merry shit out of it, cos it's hardly the radio-friendly, breakthrough, buzzbin unit shifter they can have been expecting."

Well, exactly. And most of the album follows suit. In another hitherto frowned-upon outbreak of irony, the only track adhering to the "new U2" blueprint is entitled "No Surprises". The rest of the record, meanwhile, is full of them (surprises, that is), as Yorke explores typically oblique themes of future paranoia, technofear and the dehumanisation of society to a relentlessly challenging soundtrack. There's little danger anyone will interpret this album, as some did with "The Bends", as a sort of pre-emptive suicide note. Although, once you throw in the album title, songs like "Karma Police" and "Subterranean Homesick Alien" and the accompanying messily futuristic artwork, some might view it as a, er, Orwellian concept album.

"Oh God," blanches Colin. "What a ghastly thought. That makes it sound like Rick Wakeman and his Knights of the Roundtable On Ice or something."

Something like "Fitter, Happier", however, where a computerised voice sifts through an oddly emotional list of modern-life-as-rubbish concerns (*"Getting on better with your associate employee contemporaries/Will frequently check credit at (moral) bank (hole in wall)/Concerned (but powerless"*) does betray a pre-occupation with precisely where the planet is heading.

"On this album, the outside world became all there was," says Yorke, "and the most irrelevant material took on stunning beauty and breathlessness. This is because I had sorted the internal stuff out. I wrote down what was around always and my singing 'identity' felt very loose. I am an airhead on this record.

"Have you ever been to the Sony Building in New York? *That* is the future. I'm just taking Polaroids of things around me, moving too fast. Why? How can you indulge in self-analysis when all this amazing shit's going on?" Hmm.

"I think Thom suddenly woke up to what was happening around him," explains Ed. "He's certainly no longer talking from just one perspective. The lyrics are a reaction to everything he had to go through last time. But you could probably tie the songs on 'The Bends' into a concept. The only real difference between 'OK Computer' and 'The Bends' is 'The Bends' felt completed and this album doesn't."

"Yeah," says Phil, suddenly awaking from soundbite slumber. "'The Bends' was like 'Star Wars' – a neat, separate entity with lots of explosions but not much plot. And 'OK Computer' is 'The Empire Strikes Back' – more ambitious, more complex, with more loose ends, but ultimately much better."

He pauses to admire this analogy, until spotting its fatal flaw. "Our next album won't be 'Return Of The Jedi' though," he adds, hastily. "Because that was rubbish."

"And 'Pablo Honey' was actually something like 'Battlestar Galactica'," chips in Colin. "A low-budget, poor quality version of the real thing."

Blimey. Who needs Thom Yorke, eh? Typically though, just as The Professionals finally stumble across some award-winning dialogue, it's time to leave.

In a few minutes, Radiohead will clamber into their sensible, non-rock star cars and prepare to go back to their sensible, non-rock star houses, secure in the knowledge that, despite one or two minor hiccups, they have got the job done like The Professionals they are.

PARTY POOPER

IN a few days, The Maker fax machine will whirr into action, finally informing us, amongst other things, of the "reason" why Thom Yorke wishes to withdraw from the media spotlight. ("If it affects my work, if it affects or represses what I want to say in the future, then it is bad, that's all.") And, in a few weeks, Radiohead will head straight back into that spotlight, off on another massive world tour that will probably keep them away from those non-rock star houses for at least a couple of years. By the time they get back, the new millennium will be just around the corner.

"All these millennarians and adventists and obscure Swiss cults who think that something amazing is going to happen on millennium night are just deluding themselves," smiles Colin, by way of a parting shot. "I think it's just going to be one big party."

Thom Yorke, as ever, sees things rather differently.

"Britpop was a party to which we weren't invited?" he snorts, derisively. "Well, now we're not having a party, so no one's invited. Ha ha ha ha."

As they say on those Professionals-inspired Almera ads: Tell me about it.

Next week in Melody Maker: An exclusive track-by-track runthrough of the whole, amazing new Radiohead album, 'OK Computer'. What does Thom Yorke like about wasps? Why are New Labour the Radiohead of politics? And why does John Power's alien theory suck? All will be revealed! Starring: the whole band! Even Thom Yorke!

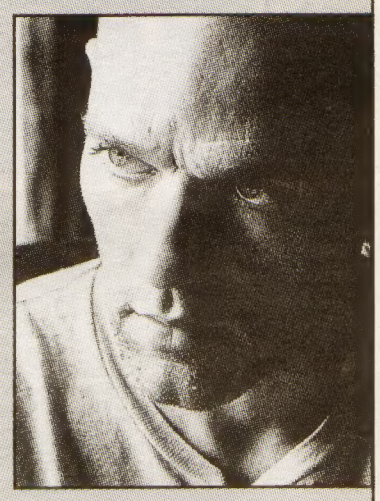
One miserable old boiler and some pals...

'If the media spotlight affects my work or represses what I want to say in the future, then it is bad' – Thom Yorke

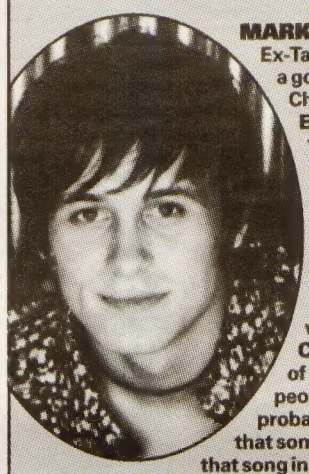
THEIR FAME IS TRUE

Radiohead's celebrity fanclub

MICHAEL STIPE



Egghead REM mainman is on record as saying "Radiohead are so good it scares me" and supposedly suggested to Thom Yorke that he shouldn't do any interviews with the weekly music press. Cheers, bald bloke.
Colin: "'So good it scares me'? He'd obviously just heard 'Climbing Up The Walls'."
Jonny: "He rang me at home once. I took a while to answer and he said, 'Sorry, were you on the other line?' and I was like, 'What other line? I haven't even got another *room*.' Did he give me any advice? Yeah: 'Get another phone.'"



MARK OWEN

Ex-Take That poppet who performed a godawful version of "Creep" on Channel 4's "Bob Mills Show".
Ed: "When we came offstage at the 1995 Smash Hits Poll Winners Party, Mark Owen grabbed me and said, 'I know you didn't go down that well, but I think you're brilliant. And I was like 'Oooh, thanks Mark!'"
Phil: "He asked us where our last single went in the chart and when I didn't know, he looked at me like I was really weird."
Colin: "We haven't heard the version of 'Creep' that he did but, from what people have told us about it, that's probably just as well. It's weird enough that someone like him should identify with that song in the first place."

ALICIA SILVERSTONE

Hollywood's current "It" girl may have dissed yer 'Head as "cry baby music" and "complaint rock" in her hit flick "Clueless", but in real life she's the proverbial Big Fan.
Ed: "'Clueless' was a good film, so we didn't really mind anyway, but I met her at a premiere when I was slightly drunk and she said she loved our stuff. Who can tell if she meant it, though. In Hollywood, everyone is a big fan of everyone."
Thom: "I never saw 'Clueless', but I'm sure it is my sort of thing. 'Complaint rock'? Yes, it makes me smile."

ALANIS MORISSETTE

The multi-platinum enfant terrible of corporate femme-rock personally requested Radiohead as support on her "Jagged Little Pill" tour of American enormodomes.
Ed: "She'd done 'Fake Plastic Trees' every night until we started on the tour apparently, when she stopped 'out of respect'. Her music's pretty terrible but she's a lovely person. We had drinks with her and stuff. She's frighteningly together considering what she's been through."

OASIS

Yes! Even the mono-browed major domos of good-time rock'n'roll are a little bit partial to good, old-fashioned angst rock.
Colin: "We did a couple of radio shows in America with them a while back. They showed a quite disturbing in-depth knowledge of 'The Bends', actually. Christ knows what *they saw* in it, but then I think they're great, too."

JANE SEYMOUR

Fragrant English Rose of a zillion bonkbuster TV mini-series graciously allowed Thom and the "lads" to record large chunks of "OK Computer" in her library.
Jonny: "We never got to meet her, actually. She was away when we were in there, but there are hundreds of framed photos of her everywhere, which is a bit odd. And her library is full of crap books."

and, er, GARY DAVIS

Self-styled "Medallion Man" behemoth of pre-Radcliffe Fab FM was, incomprehensibly, the first DJ to playlist Radiohead. Young, free and single, that was his catchphrase. Not surprisingly.
Colin: "When he was doing the weekend breakfast show on Radio 1, he was the only person who played our first single, 'Prove Yourself'. The only person ANYWHERE. God knows why, considering the chorus went, '*I'm better off dead.*' I'd like to meet him and say, 'John Peel never played our record, but you did. You're a star.'"